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## **“Public Relations and the Open Society”**

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I should like to begin, Mr. Chairman, by saying that I take a good deal of pleasure, both personally and officially, in the invitation to stand before this audience as the Foundation lecturer for 1967. Personally, because I am well launched on the final year of my public relations career with Du Pont, which now reaches toward the quarter century mark, and I welcome the opportunity to deliver what will perhaps serve as a sort of valedictory message to my peers.

Officially, because I am one of those who are very happy that the Foundation lecture, for two years divorced from the annual meeting of PRSA, is back in the fold. The Foundation trustees hope that the reunion will prove permanent. Certainly the timing is propitious, for last year we finished up a series of six lectures based on the history and development of public relations in North America, and we have, at present, no plans for a new series.

My own appearance, you might say, constitutes an affirmation by the trustees that they do not consider that the lecturer must be an academician, and that, in general, they feel a good deal of flexibility is desirable, not only as to the lecturer, but as to the subject as well. And especially, it constitutes an assertion that there is no need for the Foundation lecturer to consider himself a failure if he talks for less than an hour. I can promise you that I shall have shot my bolt in not much over half that time.

The theme of this annual meeting is, I am told, Public Relations and the Open Society. That, I suppose not by coincidence, is the title assigned me, which gives this talk the added significance of being a sort of belated secondary keynote address, a piece of timing of which Lewis Carroll would have approved. I remember, as a matter of fact, one of those charged with responsibility for this annual meeting making a somewhat pessimistic remark. He said he supposed that if I actually did discuss public relations and the open society, it would probably be the only time the subject was mentioned in Philadelphia this week.

As to this, I am in no position to comment. But I do intend to talk about the subject assigned me, if only to give comfort to my pessimistic friend, who happens to be your program chairman. So let us begin by trying to develop an acceptable definition.

The term open society was, so far as I know, first used by the French philosopher and anti-intellectualist, Henri Bergson; he spoke of open and closed societies with specific religious criteria in mind, the determinant being a society's philosophical or metaphysical system. (Parenthetically,

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perhaps I should reassure you. The voice is the voice of Perry, even though the words may seem like the words of McLuhan.)

To continue, the term was picked up by Professor Karl Popper, author of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. He gave it a social and political connotation rather different from that of Professor Bergson. He used it to describe a society that permitted a certain amount of personal freedom and economic and social mobility. I assume that it is in the Popperistic rather than the Bergsonian sense that the sponsors of this meeting intend the term to be used.

Our president, Carroll Bateman, left little doubt about this in a message he addressed to the membership last spring. Indeed, he carried it forward to the extent of pinning the term on a specific society, ours, and promised that this meeting would examine current challenges to the open society in terms of their effect upon business, education, government, culture, religion and individual rights. If that isn't a tent large enough to hold all three rings of Barnum and Bailey's circus, I count myself no judge. Of course, Carroll will never be confused with a midget, and it is not surprising that a man who is that big thinks that big.

For me, it seems reasonable to apply the term to any society in which the individual has the opportunity to progress as far as his talents and ambition will take him. I do not see it as implying a classless society, but it certainly does involve free passage between and through classes.

The second significant aspect of the open society is what I might, borrowing a term from the intellectuals who conduct social studies, identify as multiple choice. The individual is free, within the limits of legality based on the public good, to select the solution that appeals to him in confronting a problem. There is no single State-determined and State-approved solution -- which may or may not work -- as is generally the case in a closed society, and as one would certainly expect in any society organized along Platonic lines.

It is, in the open society, possible to experiment, to innovate, to change one's ground or one's tactics, to fail with one solution and, without asking the State's permission, to try another. It is -- and this is the third significant aspect -- also possible for the winner not only to benefit in proportion to the magnitude of his triumph, but to dispose of the fruits of victory as suits his fancy.

The effect of these three aspects, which is to say the effect of an open society, is, by providing both opportunity and incentive, to unlock men's minds and their ambitions. There is ample historical and contemporary evidence that the resulting benefits to society are incalculable. It has, to select a commercial example, been pointed out that, while Henry Ford became a very rich man, the wealth his industrial genius created for many thousands of Americans, and for society as a whole, made his own reward seem microscopic.

To sum all this up, in the open society as I conceive it, the individual is not only free to rise as high as his talents and desires will take him; he is free to select the means through which he will do so, and he is free to use as he will the benefits to himself, all this to the ultimate and enormous gain of society.

There is a dichotomy here, and I'll get to that presently. It is implicit in what Carroll wrote last spring: that when the term open society is used here this week, it is not intended to be descriptive of some Utopian state to be attained by the world at some future day, but rather of the state in which our society exists right now. Frankly, this gives me some difficulty, for it seems to me that we have fallen considerably short of so millennial an achievement as a truly open society. Fallen so far short, indeed as to give point to Konrad Lorenz's biting comment that man may well prove to be the missing link between the anthropoid ape and the human being.

And yet I find it hard -- impossible, in fact -- to convince myself that so misanthropic a view is, on balance, warranted. I believe that man is a perfectible animal, on the grounds that while the evidence to the contrary may be impressive, it is over-matched by the evidence in favor. I believe that it is in fact lofty idealism to establish the goal of an open society, in the expectation that ultimately man will make it come true for everyone, instead of just for some. And that it is neither naive nor foolish to hope for and believe in such progress.

Man is certainly fallible, and prone to many grievous errors. There are those who rate him on a distinctly lower plane than cats and dogs, or even such wild animals as wolves and lions, as to general morality and ethics. But as a public relations man -- and here I begin the process of bringing the whole of my title into focus -- I must believe that man does want to improve himself and that part of our job is to help create the conditions under which he can do so.

I can hear the cynics laugh about this, for there is unquestionably a body of opinion, of indeterminate dimensions, that the work we do is rather on the disreputable side, that it is concerned with hoodwinking the public into allowing those for whom we work to get away with, you might say, murder, and that we are as a group, dubious characters who live by our wits, such as they may be.

The existence of these scoffers has proved disquieting to many of those who take public relations seriously, and I hear continuing calls that we unite to improve the reputation of our craft. I too cringe somewhat when I hear slighting references to the build-up boys, the public relations crew, the highbinders, the publicity operators, and realize that the people using these expressions think they are talking about the work in which I am engaged.

There is a point here, and it is important. These witty fellows may not be talking about the work in which you and I are engaged, but they are talking about work that is actually being done, and done by men and women calling themselves public relations practitioners. Herein lies the hopelessness of raising the reputation of our business by argument, exhortation, or protestation.

I have no doubt that there are more than a few men who claim to practice public relations who would adorn any Federal penitentiary. I have little doubt, for that matter, that some actually do. There are others whose concept of public relations bears the same likeness to that held by you and me as the Beatles bear to the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra.

When you consider that the activities of these gentry are often far more newsworthy than is what we do, when you consider that the flamboyant, phony PR man is going to be considered as typical,

just as is the raffish, drunken newspaperman of stage and film, what real chance is there to convince the public of the truth? Doctors have their quacks, lawyers have their shysters and ambulance chasers, and we have our phonies. Since the words public relations are in the public domain, I don't see what we can do about it. But remember, the law and medicine are respected despite these essentially minor crosses they bear. And so, I believe, is public relations.

Where I approach heresy, I guess, is in this feeling that it doesn't really matter as much as we think. What really matters is that those who are important to us and to our work know us, and respect us. I am sure that each of us can make a very real contribution to uplifting the reputation of public relations, and that we should, but we are not going to do it by protesting what a noble craft is ours, nor yet by disavowing the unsavory element in our midst.

It is my belief that the broad reputation of public relations must be left to sustain itself. It is my belief that individual public relations men and women will be judged by those with whom they work on the basis of personal contact, knowledge and experience. Those who conduct themselves in such a way as to deserve respect will be respected. Those who do not, will not. Those who show integrity, courage, intelligence -- those traits that we sum up in the single word character -- will not only be rated highly themselves, but will upgrade the reputation of our work.

Our hope must be that, gradually, sincere and serious workers in the field of public relations will, by their individual actions, build a respect for our craft that will grow until people generally share it. I believe this is happening and I rejoice that it is. We have, in my time in this business, moved a long way, and it is good to be able to testify to the fact.

Just how far we have moved can only be appreciated by those who have been involved in public relations work for many years. And most of us in that category haven't looked too closely at the past, since it seems to be in the nature of our calling to keep us eternally looking to the future. One could talk for a long time about what you see when you do take such a backward look. Let me attempt to sum it up in a few paragraphs, for it is important to us in the role we must play in the open society.

We see a situation in which the top echelons of the Government of the United States, and of the 50 states, have become well aware of the importance of public opinion and the contributions competent public relations people can make toward winning popular understanding and support. We see a situation in which top management of business and industry in the United States has increasingly come to realize the vital importance to their operations of that public understanding and support. The story is the same in education, in organized labor, in agriculture, in civic, charitable and welfare organizations.

This has not come about by chance nor yet by any self-inspired flash of genius on the part of these men who lead the nation and its main elements. It has come about because public relations men and women have won respect for their judgment from these leaders, and have convinced them of the importance of public opinion and of the necessity for winning it by deserving it.

I assure you -- not that you need be assured -- that the number of men in high posts all over the country who have this awareness of the importance of public relations, and the kindred importance of public relations people, runs into the hundreds of thousands, perhaps well into seven figures. I believe we have earned the respect and the support of the overwhelming majority of Americans in positions of importance and influence. I expect that we shall build on the momentum gained over those long, hard years and that we shall move ahead to a future in which public relations people will be entrusted with increasingly important responsibilities. I want to say that I believe they will discharge them well.

But I am tempted to volunteer two words of caution. Here is the first: Let us not, in our pleasure and relief at having won acceptance for what we do, confuse our role, or our function. All of us are happy when someone like Joe Cook of AT&T is made president of an important company. There have been others, as Denny Griswold's Golden Keys attest. But I think we have got to remember always that they didn't begin doing the work of president until they assumed the office. When they were in public relations, they let the president do his work and they did theirs.

This may sound a little blunt. Well, it is. I have heard too many public relations people argue that the concepts of public relations should dominate all other corporate functions, and that there was something wrong if the public relations man didn't hold the controlling position in his organization.

In my judgment, this is unrealistic. And it is dangerous. Public relations is one of a number of auxiliary services at the disposal of management. It is vitally important, of course. But so are the others -- legal, employee relations, purchasing, traffic, finance and the rest. And if top management were asked to list them in order of importance, I'm pretty sure some of them would rank higher than we at any given moment. For such listings depend on the urgencies of the moment, upon what is happening at any given time. I honestly think that all we are entitled to expect is that management in reaching its decisions will give due weight to the public relations aspects. There will be times when, for good and sufficient reasons, some other function will control the decision. If we are going to maintain that our view must always prevail, we shall find that management will look elsewhere for guidance, for we shall be displaying an immaturity inconsistent with the statesmanlike shadow we like to think we cast. And that will help neither us nor our role in advancing the aims of the open society.

The second word is that the relationship of a public relations man to his employer is a very personal thing. It is a relationship that no organization chart can depict with any accuracy. It is a relationship that must be established by performance and that performance, as I see it, is compounded of sound judgment; of knowledge of human reaction based on study and experience; of knowledge of the business so that his counsel will be practical; of courage to speak his mind and, if the situation warrants it, to lay his job on the line in support of what he believes; of a personality that commands respect and liking; of a willingness to sublimate himself for the good of the corporate effort.

By virtue of his position, a public relations director is given the opportunity to establish such a relationship, but the opportunity is all he can be given. For the rest, he must earn, and will receive, exactly as much respect as he deserves. This is a matter of *quod erat demonstrandum*, and not of

fiat. It is unrealistic to expect to be accepted without convincing demonstration of one's usefulness. If I sound like Polonius, I am sorry, but I am concerned about some young newcomers to public relations who just don't see why they do not become instant oracles, who do not understand that such status must be earned.

To pick up the main thread, no matter how well we succeed, the jeerers and the cynics will remain. As to them, I hope we shall ultimately attain to a sense of security in which we can follow the advice given to some of us at Du Pont one day by a Latin-American public relations counselor who was commenting on a handful of nuisances operating on our flanks. He said, with great sagacity: "Don't even ignore them."

If this Goldwynian *mot* seems to lack dignity, let me commend to you the words of Woodrow Wilson, explaining how he kept his equanimity in the ferocious presence of Theodore Roosevelt.

"The way to meet an adversary like Roosevelt," he said, "is to gaze at the stars over his head."

There is another group of cynics who are no mere specialists, but who include all of mankind in their scorn. They would surely -- and here I turn to the doctrine of perfectibility -- mock anyone who believes that man is better today than he was in the days of the pharaohs, or who believes that he can or will be better tomorrow than he is today. Better, that is, in his understanding, his kindness to others, in his desire to live in peace and amity with his fellow men.

Well, to reject the doctrine of perfectibility is to deny the usefulness of public relations, for the basic tenet of public relations is that men and their organizations can win popular support -- and thus survive and prosper -- only by doing the right things for the right reasons and by seeing to it that the public understands that this is being done. Since man is fallible, he can never achieve perfection. But he can approach it if he will. Nowhere is this truer than in his relationships with other people, and here the element of communication is of major importance. And communication is the area in which we are presumed to be most expert.

What has this to do with the open society or with our relationship to it? A great deal, because of the dichotomy I mentioned earlier. The open society exists on two quite different planes. There is, first, the concept, what we think the open society should offer to those who participate in it. There is, second, the reality, what our version of the open society actually does offer to those who participate in it. The gulf between the two is substantial.

We can, I should think, agree that our problem in America is to bring these two, the concept and the reality, closer together, not by diminishing the moral imperatives stated in the theory, but by upgrading our performance in the practice. It is my contention that public relations has a role of major, perhaps even of critical, importance in bringing this about.

No one can doubt that our society offers more freedom and mobility than did what stands as one of the classical examples of the closed society, the feudal system in which grandson after son after father after grandfather ad infinitum was locked into the same relative position in the scheme of

things. One can wonder, as one observes the threat to the individual posed by the growing pressures of an expanding population and by the world's steadily more complicated technology, whether it is going to be possible to keep things moving in the same direction they have taken in our country since 1776.

One can wonder, but we can know only when events tell us. In the meantime, I think we have to act on the assumption that the open society can be maintained as a viable concept in the face of our population growth and of the technology that has stimulated Professor Galbraith to a new book. We must believe that through education in its broadest sense we can bring the reality into closer consonance with the theory.

Wherein do we fall short today? Most notably, I should think, in the exclusions. Millions of Americans whose skins are black, red, yellow or brown feel, and with reason, that when people talk about the open society, they do not mean members of these minority groups. Millions of Americans whose skins are white feel, and with reason, that, because of geographical location, or educational disadvantage, or physical or mental handicap, they too are excluded from the open society.

There are some, I know, who maintain that such exclusions invalidate the whole concept of the open society. There are others who maintain that such exclusions are irrelevant to the concept. I do not agree with either extreme. The exclusions are lamentable. They are inconsistent with the theory and philosophical base. But they are not irrelevant, and they do not negate the base. Rather they challenge us as men and women generally, and as public relations men and women specifically, to do something about it.

It is not an easy challenge. We have seen that the emotions and the prejudices evoked by attempts on the part of some minorities to move as though they were in fact part of the open society are very deep-seated. We have seen that the indifference to the plight of whites who, through no fault of their own, make no effort to move as though they were in fact part of the open society, is very deep-rooted, too.

There should be nothing surprising about this. Professor Popper, in drawing his contrast between the closed and the open society, points out that the former is basically a comfortable way of life, even to some extent to those who are among the disadvantaged. It is comfortable because one is not confronted with choices. Everything is all set down in the rules and all one has to do is ride along. The closed society exists to preserve the status quo, to resist change. Let me quote briefly from Professor Popper.

I do not mean that no changes can occur ... I mean rather that the comparatively infrequent changes ... are not based upon a rational attempt to improve social conditions.... Taboos rigidly regulate and dominate all aspects of life. They do not leave many loopholes. There are few problems in this form of life, and nothing really equivalent to moral problems.... What I mean is that he (that is, the citizen) will rarely find himself in the position of doubting how he ought to act. The right way is always determined, although difficulties must be overcome in following it.

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The open society, on the other hand, tends to the abstract rather than what the professor calls the organic. It involves the conscious effort to improve the lot of those who exist under it. The effort inevitably and immediately introduces tensions. And so the strains and stresses with which we wrestle today are part and parcel of the open society. They would not exist were we rigidly encased in the taboos and rules of a closed society.

It is a significant aspect of the closed society -- I have cited Professor Popper on the point -- that even those who are disadvantaged are not necessarily unhappy. A slave in ancient Greece -- and let us not forget that slavery was an integral part of the Athenian society -- was likely to be, if not exactly content with his lot, at least more contented with it than with the struggles necessary to change it. If he was badly treated, he was obviously unhappy, but the chances are he was unhappy about the treatment more than about being a slave. And if he was well treated, slavery might have felt rather comfortable.

This is no endorsement of the closed society. I am on the side of the open society, and strongly so. But it is important, I think, for us to realize that constant change is a concomitant of the open society, that people frequently are not happy with change, and tend to resist it, even when they stand to gain by it, and that you cannot have an open society without tensions.

Can you imagine a situation that cries more loudly for the talents and techniques that public relations people possess? We should, I fear, be claiming too much if we are to take credit for manufacturing change, even though at some times and in some places we may have some responsibility for it. But that we have played a major role in counseling others on how and why to promote change and how best to adjust and accommodate themselves to it, that this is quite possibly our major role in contemporary life, is too obvious for anyone remotely acquainted with the facts to deny.

It is almost superfluous for me, or anyone else, to call upon public relations people to play their part in the development of our open society. They are, willy-nilly, already doing so because it is inherent in their work that they become involved in such matters. It would seem to me, as a matter of fact, that the drives and compulsions that mark an open society involve, as they affect, every American, even including those whom society tacitly bars or ignores.

But so far as public relations people are concerned, it is not enough merely to be involved. It seems to me that we must be conscious of our involvement, that we must be aware of the responsibilities it places upon us, and that we must accept them as part of the job, to be approached with all the skill, knowledge and determination we can muster.

We must do this because the open society is by definition dynamic. It can never become static. If it does not advance, it will retrogress, which is unthinkable -- but not impossible.

And we must do this because the struggle revolves to a major degree around human motivations. It would not be accurate to say that the problems confronting the open society would be solved were we able to change the motivations of those who resist attempts to find

solutions. But they would become open to solution, and one of the most exacerbating aspects of our present situation is precisely that our big problems do not now seem solvable.

Nor are these the only motivations with which we are concerned. Solutions depend upon the motivations of the underprivileged, certainly. They depend upon motivating the millions of men and women who are uninterested and uninvolved. I do not see how our problems can be solved unless and until someone succeeds in creating in many such people an action-provoking awareness that a life that is wholly inner-directed is no life at all, but only an existence. And what of those who are eager to be involved, and have much to contribute, but have not been, in that wonderfully graphic modern phrase, "turned on?" Can there be any doubt that communication is the touchstone in these and other areas?

Thus, there is, I submit, a clear and pressing need for public relations men and women to take up the burden, or at least those public relations men and women who regard their work as more than merely a source of income. For they have increasingly the knowledge, the training, the experience, the expertise, to make a vital contribution toward bringing together the shadow and the substance of the open society.

As I have hinted, it is not an easy assignment, for in many areas emotions are running high and real trouble is all too likely. But, while it may be that I am a prisoner of the Protestant ethic, it seems to me that we gain little stature, either in our own eyes or the eyes of others, by dealing with the easy problems. If we are to justify our existence, it must be by tackling the difficult, the tough, even the dangerous problems.

Success is an absolute that we shall probably never know. But so is failure. By doing the best we know how, we can guarantee that there is some progress and that momentum is not lost. Actually, it is not possible to appraise events as to whether they have succeeded or failed until we have the benefit of the perspective that time alone can give us. I am sure that many times what appeared contemporaneously to be failure was clearly seen in retrospect to be success, or at the least part of a developing successful pattern. And vice versa. Perhaps it is best that we not try to keep score, which we concern ourselves with doing the best we can and not with trying to assess the results of our efforts, leaving that to time.

Why must we do these things? Why am I, as your speaker today, emotionally involved in this topic? For I am involved. This is no act. I can tell you in a few words.

I am using the expression "open society" because that is the theme of this meeting and because it seems to me reasonably descriptive. But the term doesn't really matter. What we are talking about is the survival of our civilization, under whatever name pleases you. And that is something on which I believe all of us here can justify the development of emotion.

I find that I must read you one more paragraph from Professor Popper. I read it, I ask you to believe, not because I am too lazy to arrange my own words and phrases, but because I cannot imagine anyone stating it more eloquently than this Professor of Logic and Scientific Method at the University of London. Here is what he says:

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There is no return to a harmonious state of nature. If we turn back, then we must go the whole way -- we must return to the beasts. It is an issue which we must face squarely, hard though it may be for us to do so. If we dream of a return to our childhood, if we are tempted to rely on others and so be happy, if we shrink from the task of carrying our cross, the cross of humaneness, of reason, of responsibility, if we lose courage and flinch from the strain, then we must try to fortify ourselves with a clear understanding of the simple decision before us. We can return to the beasts. But if we wish to remain human, then there is only one way, the way into the open society. We must go on into the unknown, the uncertain and insecure, using what reason we may have to plan as well as we can for both, security and freedom.

Professor Popper says, "We must go on." The use of the imperative interests me, for I wonder if these days, there isn't too much talk about rights and not enough talk about duties. Be this as it may, I can conceive of no more vital duty than that men and women, who have perhaps unique and certainly essential contributions to make to the society in which they exist, do so. Public relations people have such contributions to make. It is my simple proposition that they owe it to themselves and to our version of the open society to make them.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the challenge we must answer if we are to be true to ourselves and to the responsibilities we assumed, knowingly or not, when we turned to this field of public relations. I have said this is the way in which we can justify our existence. It is also the way in which, if we are destined to do so, we can achieve greatness. We can achieve it. And we shall. This I believe, so help me God.